

VZCZCXRO0520
PP RUEHGI RUEHMA RUEHROV
DE RUEHNJ #0870/01 3111607
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 071607Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5866
INFO RUCNFUR/DARFUR COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NDJAMENA 000870

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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS; G/TIP FOR VERONICA
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CHAD: ZOE'S ARK AND THE ALLEGED CHILD SMUGGLING
CASE

¶1. (SBU) Nine Europeans and four Chadians remain in Government of Chad (GOC) custody in the widely-publicized and bizarre case in which a French NGO, Zoe's Ark, attempted to ferry 103 Chadian/Sudanese children to Europe in a chartered Spanish plane. Personal diplomacy by French President Sarkozy secured the release of three accompanying French journalists and the Spanish flight crew. Whether President Sarkozy will be able to fulfill his promise to extract the remaining Europeans remains to be seen; most Chadians feel that Chadian justice should be served to the accused kidnappers. President Deby has stated that the event will not affect the eventual deployment of the UN/EU force (MINURCAT), but the event bolstered his contention that Chad's hospitality towards Darfur refugees is not adequately appreciated (and in this case was abused.) The event has also hampered the ability of UN and other humanitarian workers to travel to the East. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 25, 16 Europeans and four Chadians were detained at Abeche's airport when they attempted to board 103 children onto a France-bound private aircraft. President Deby reacted swiftly to assert Chadian control of the situation and Abeche authorities placed the NGO members, accompanying journalists and airline crew under arrest. The French Ambassador -- dealing simultaneously with a public relations and consular crisis -- was quoted by Agences France Presse on October 30 as saying that "the members of the organization who took part in this whole illegal manipulation will answer for their actions in Chad."

¶3. (SBU) On Sunday, October 28, the GOC chartered a plane to Abeche and requested that the diplomatic corps, Chadian officials, and senior UN and NGO representatives attend a show-and-tell at which the Minister of Interior emphasized that Chad would punish those involved in the attempted kidnapping. The diplomatic corps was shown the private charter plane - still sitting on the runway - that was to be used by Zoe's Ark. They were taken to the orphanage where aid workers and UN staff were caring for the children. The children appeared to be in good health. Statements that day by the Minister of the Interior calling into question the future of the UN/EU force were quickly contradicted by President Deby's announcement (apparently after speaking with the French Ambassador and President Sarkozy) that the incident would not impact MINURCAT deployment.

¶4. (U) On November 4, in a lightning visit to N'djamena, French President Sarkozy secured the release of the four Spanish flight attendants and three French journalists. The six members of Zoe's Ark (all French nationals) still in detention were brought to N'djamena's court and arraigned on November 5. They face charges of fraud, kidnapping and being an accessory to kidnapping. (According to media sources, the three members of the flight crew could soon be freed from

custody.)

15. (U) Meanwhile, Chadian press coverage has highlighted general public opinion that all those associated with Zoe's Ark should face trial in Chad. The French-language daily N'djamena Bi-Hebdo screamed of "Childgate" and Le Progres quoted a civil servant as saying "I believe that even though Chad is a sovereign country, it continues to suffer from pressure coming from its former colonizer." On November 5, President Sarkozy stated that he would return for the remaining French citizens, saying that "France looks after its own, even when they have done bad things." In a radio interview shortly thereafter, President Deby responded that "for the time being", Chadian justice should be followed.

16. (SBU) For the humanitarian community, the affair's fallout has had two negative impacts. The first comes from the Chadian Government's decision to require renewal of all travel authorizations emanating from the office that authorized the Zoe's Ark visit. This has created an enormous backlog of hundreds of applications, forcing newly arriving UN/NGO staff - as well as those returning from leave - to sit for weeks in the capitol's expensive hotels before traveling east. The second impact has been the loss of faith of many Chadians and some Sudanese refugees vis-a-vis the humanitarians, particularly in Abeche, where the large UN/NGO presence offers plenty of targets for any potential acts of resentment. In addition, the free use by Government authorities (at the outset of the incident) of charges of trafficking and organ sale has inflamed popular opinion. While anti-French demonstrations took place in Abeche on October 30, fortunately, up to now, such acts have not escalated beyond rock throwings and verbal confrontations.

NDJAMENA 00000870 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) Comment: This bizarre episode has received non-stop media coverage for the last two weeks. The organization's audacity and/or naivety is the talk of the town and of the humanitarian community. The event also highlighted the extremely close relationship between Chad and France (even in the post-Chirac era), while providing Deby a new conundrum: should he allow the extradition of the members of Zoe's Ark to France or bow to Chadian public opinion that they should (at least) be tried in Chad? While President Deby has stated that the event will not affect the eventual deployment of the UN/EU force, it bolstered his contention that Chad's hospitality towards Darfur refugees is not adequately appreciated (and in this case was abused). End comment.
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